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SUBJECT: NORTHERN CATHOLICS RELY ON TIES SOUTH, ABROAD

REF: A: 02 Hanoi 2152 B. 02 Hanoi 1556

C: Hanoi 608 D. HCMC 255

This is a joint Embassy/ConGen cable.

1. (SBU) Summary: The Catholic Church remains strong in the northern provinces of Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh, the historic heartland of Catholicism in Vietnam. With government acceptance, the Church is expanding the number of clergy, renovating colonial-era churches, and planning new charitable programs. Frustrations remain, however, at restrictions on the numbers of students sent to seminary. Much of the financial underwriting for the Church in the region comes from Vietnamese-Americans who trace their roots to the area. While ties with Catholics who fled south during Vietnam's partition in 1954 appear to be fading over time, traces remain. End Summary.

2. (U) During a joint Embassy/ConGen reporting visit, poloffs met on February 23 and 24 with Catholic Bishops Nguyen Van Yen of Phat Diem diocese (which includes most of Ninh Binh province) and Hoang Van Tiem of Bui Chu diocese (most of Nam Dinh province), as well as priests and leaders of local parish committees and representatives of the Committees on Religious Affairs (CRA) for the two provinces. (Ref a recounts a similar visit by Pol/C in 2002.)

Catholicism Thriving

3. (U) According to official statistics, in Nam Dinh province 21% of the population -- or 412,000 people -- is Catholic. The province has 71 priests (28 of them recently appointed), and 635 nuns in 5 different convents. (Note: Technically, the nuns are not officially recognized as religious workers or under the official supervision of the provincial or central Committees on Religious Affairs. There are no officially sanctioned training or study programs for female Catholics. End note) Fifty male students from Nam Dinh are currently enrolled at the Hanoi Catholic seminary (ref b), while another six are studying in Paris and Rome. Ninh Binh province has 144,000 Catholics in 65 parishes, served by 25 officially recognized priests and another 14 who have finished seminary but are completing an apprenticeship before being assigned to their own parishes.

4. (U) In Quan Lieu Church in Nam Dinh -- a parish founded in 1792 -- there are 4500 faithful, and the local priest conducts mass daily as well as weekly Bible study classes and marriage preparation classes. In Ninh Binh city, the Catholic parish is building a huge new church, with seating for 4000, which should give it ample space to expand from the current membership of 1500.

Expanding into Charitable Work

5. (U) Officials from Nam Dinh's Committee on Religion noted that the Catholic Church had been operating a center for the disabled since 1930, entirely run and funded by Church funds. Bishop Tiem of Bui Chu diocese recalled that when he had attempted several years ago to found a house for delinquent children, local authorities blocked the project. Noting that the Church had opened technical schools in southern Vietnam, he said in the near future he hoped to found a training school for the poor, and predicted he would receive permission. In Nam Dinh's Quan Phuoc parish, the local priest said the Church is building a vocational training center for the blind, although it plans to "present" the center to local authorities after completion. In both provinces, the churches operate a number of kindergartens, according to various sources. Religious NGOs from other countries also have a presence -- a Korean Christian group built a hospital in Nam Dinh and an American organization is planning a vocational training center -- but are strictly prohibited from proselytizing, officials stated.

Never Enough Priests

16. (U) Shortages of priests continue to frustrate the church, Catholics noted. The seven churches in Ninh Binh's Mieu Giap parish share a single priest with two other parishes, and most of the churches are only open for mass on their patron saints' days and the Tet lunar holiday. In Nam Dinh's Quan Phung parish, the resident priest ministers to 9200 faithful in three parishes, with only the help of an as-yet unordained seminary graduate. Both bishops expressed frustrations about continued GVN limitations on the number of seminary students. Bishop Yen of Phat Diem noted that, in 1954 there had been 155 priests in this diocese, but that by 1988 the number had dropped to ten, six of whom were too ill or old to remain active. Bishop Tiem noted that Bui Chu diocese currently had 63 priests, compared to 150 priests in 1954. He pointed out, however, that there were 22 seminarians from his diocese currently studying in Hanoi, all of whom would return after finishing their studies. He would like to send even more -- he has 120 candidates for the seven places he is allocated in each entering class -- but is unable to obtain permission. The bishop also explained that a previous bishop had "secretly" ordained 20 priests without government approval, "common" in the past when GVN authorities were unlikely to approve ordinations directly. These 20 were now attending a special two-year program in the seminary in Nha Trang (ref c), after which the GVN agreed to recognize their positions.

North-South Relations

17. (U) In 1954, hundreds of thousands of Catholics fled from north to south, in some case transplanting entire communities and building new churches named for those they had left behind. Echoes of that migration are found today in the thriving Catholic communities of Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai (which today likely contains the highest proportion of Catholics in the country), Lam Dong, Vung Tau, and Can Tho -- communities that are far more prosperous today than their northern counterparts. Only with reunification in 1975 did communication between the northern and southern communities begin to resume (albeit hampered by the political situation and restrictions on travel of the period before "doi moi").

18. (U) Asked to describe the connections that still exist, the parish priest of Quan Phung told poloffs that he still travels to HCMC every year to visit "sister communities" established by former parishioners. He cited an association of believers from the south whose members return to the north for a meeting in his province every five years. The church council in Mieu Giap parish is now constructing a church guesthouse to be used by visitors returning to their "Que Huong" (hometown). On the governmental side, members of the Ninh Binh's CRA said they also travel to HCMC and other southern provinces on a fairly regular basis to meet with their counterparts. HCMC's CRA confirmed and welcomed these contacts and noted that ties between the northern and southern Catholic communities were "important."

19. (U) Vietnamese Catholic communities overseas are also helpful supporters, according to various contacts. According to Bishop Yen, his diocese would be "unable to support itself" without contributions from abroad. He noted that there were many Phat Diem Diocese associations outside the province (the majority of them in the US), which sent financial contributions to help rebuild and maintain churches. At the front of the Phat Diem Cathedral is a plaque listing approximately 100 donors (and their nationalities) who had contributed to its recent reconstruction completed in 2000/2001; all but two were Americans.

Comment

10. (SBU) Contrasts between the north and south remain striking. Southern Catholic churches, at least in those areas with a high concentration of Catholics, are generally vibrant centers of community life, with often large or even huge facilities, and usually in good physical condition. Many were only built after 1954, and a large number have been rebuilt and/or expanded in the over the past decade as Vietnam's relations with the outside world -- in particular the US -- have become normalized. The churches in the north often appear to be museum relics. While much reconstruction has taken place -- notably the spectacular Phat Diem Cathedral -- many others appear to be little-used and sometimes decaying reminders of the colonial era. The shortage of priests also appears to be more of a problem in the north, perhaps because of financial limitations of various dioceses to sponsor students (as well as due to government restrictions on numbers). Southern Catholic seminarians appear to have far greater access to scholarships to study overseas, certainly for studies in the

U.S. The southern churches also tend to have greater financial resources that enable them to undertake more charitable activities, which allow them to assist the disadvantaged in their own communities but may limit their abilities simultaneously to provide much funding to their northern relatives. Nonetheless, the renewed and growing ties between northern and southern Catholic churches, as well as between Vietnamese Catholic congregations in Vietnam and overseas, are welcome signs of progress toward reconciliation, a process that is likely to continue to flourish.

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